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Last Updated: Wednesday, 20 December 2006, 06:05 GMT

[E-mail this to a friend](#)[Printable version](#)**African children 'at risk of ritual abuse'**by **Steven Shukor**

BBC News London

**A cursory glance at the classified section of the ethnic press reveals a myriad of spiritual healers making some remarkable claims.**

Considered "conduits of God" by some, they claim to be able help return a loved one, cure impotency and infertility, help advance your career and even make you wealthy.



A 10-year-old girl goes through "deliverance" in a London church

One such spiritualist says he can cast away "evil influences and bad luck", another will break voodoo and black magic curses and several others offer exorcisms.

Concern has been growing about the impact on children of such ritual practices.

The issue hit the headlines with the grim discovery of a torso of a young boy in the Thames in September 2001.

Police believe the child, later named Adam, had been the victim of a west African-style ritual sacrifice.

How widespread is the problem? Academics estimate only 5% of crimes involving possession or witchcraft are actually reported.

Africans Unite Against Child Abuse (Afruca), a UK charity, is calling for tighter regulation of minority churches and faith organisations.

"Anybody can just come over and open a church and they don't have to show they're complying with child protection guidelines," said Afruca spokesman Million Joseph.

"We are concerned with some pastors who are not accountable to anybody and who have the means to manipulate their followers into believing their child is possessed."

Kingston Racial Equality Council (KREC), a voluntary organisation in south-west London, is undertaking research on the potential for child abuse in African

**“ These pastors are seen as conduits of God and they have enormous authority and control over church members ”**

Amma Anane-Agyel  
Tower Hamlets

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evangelical churches.

"With issues such as demonic possession, you have to consider the impact of exorcism on a child both physically and mentally," said John Azah, KREC director.

"If you take a child to a church and force him or her to drink what is claimed to be holy water and physically beat the devil out of them - that's child abuse."

Mr Azah went undercover to approach an African pastor in the East End a few years ago, claiming his niece was possessed.

"His church was basically his living room," he said. "He claimed he could cure both of us with a potion which would cost £700."

The project, covering Kingston and Croydon, aims to identify these churches and work with them and social services to protect children.

"The aim of this project, which we hope will eventually be rolled out across London, is to find out how widespread ritual child abuse is and put systems in place to address it," he said.

### 'Conduits of God'

A BBC Newsnight investigation in February 2005 suggested only a third of London's local authorities were taking the issue seriously.

Since then, Tower Hamlets in east London has identified 60 churches in the borough where exorcisms might take place.

"These pastors are seen as conduits of God and they have enormous authority and control over church members," said Amma Anane-Agyel, of the council's social services department.



Adam is believed to have been brought to the UK for a ritual killing

"Our concern is that practices like exorcism may be harmful to the child, not just physically but emotionally as well, and affect their whole wellbeing," she said.

Ms Anane-Agyel manages the council's African family services which has set up a pastors' group bringing together church leaders and council representatives to discuss ritual practices.

"Rather than denigrating people's beliefs, we focus on the harm acts like exorcisms will have on the child.

**“ We do not police the inside of people's homes and are increasingly reliant on vigilance within the community ”**

"This approach is usually much more effective in persuading people not to resort to such practices."

Det Ch Supt Peter Spindler

However, the African Caribbean Evangelical Alliance, a non-regulatory body with 3,000 members, said exorcism was not

inherently bad.

"If it's done biblically and children and adults are not harmed, then exorcisms are fine," said spokesman Katie Kirby.

In the past five years, 32 cases of crimes involving possession or witchcraft were in London out of 40 nationally, according to the Department for Education and Skills.

Det Ch Supt Peter Spindler, head of the Metropolitan Police's child abuse investigation unit, said academics estimate only 5% of the actual abuse taking place is reported.

Speaking at a child abuse conference in London in July, he said: "We do not police the inside of people's homes and are increasingly reliant on vigilance within the community."

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